



## Power and Office Politics: Rumor and Reality

**By Jacqui Love Marshall**

Office politics have been around since ancient times. Julius Caesar succumbed to them, and Aristotle told the Greeks: "Man is by nature a political animal." As a middle manager, even Tony Soprano spent most of his day (and therapy sessions) pondering the power elements and politics of his world. No wonder Tony watched the History Channel in search of leadership tips.

Ignoring office politics is not likely to land you a dagger in the back or a bullet in the head. But don't underestimate the career fatalities that can befall the politically unaware. Jean Hollands, a Silicon Valley corporate team builder, advises: "The person who says, 'I'm not political' is in great danger ... Only the fittest will survive, and the fittest will be the ones who understand their office's politics."

Face it, office politics are here to stay. If anything, the game has become more complex.

### 'Power': Not a Dirty Word

At the heart of office politics is that daunting word — POWER — so let's start there. For some, power falls into the company of words that carries negative connotation, along with influence, control and manipulation. Few of us were raised in worlds ruled by truly powerful people. So power holds a mysterious, perhaps unsavory, place in many minds. And we're right to be skeptical. All too often, power has been abused. Who hasn't encountered at least one manipulative, dishonest or back-biting colleague? However, the ability to negotiate and leverage power can make a measurable difference in navigating choppy business waters, achieving positive results and advancing your career.

It's helpful to think of power as a kind of currency in business environments. As currency, power is minted in many forms — knowledge and information, access to others, access to resources (including funds), decision-making authority, approval to act, latitude to take risks, forgiveness when a risk turns to failure, etc. Another reality is that, in any organization, some people have more power, influence and autonomy than others, often (but not always) along hierarchical lines. The ability to offer, share, exchange, anoint or negotiate power is a key component of office politics. And the ability to capture some of that power to get things accomplished is critical to your success. In other words, power is not a bad thing, if you understand it and can deploy it for constructive outcomes.

Ron Brown, an organizational and management consultant, sees a lot of ambivalence among managers of color in dealing with concepts of power and politics. Speaking at a diversity conference at Bennett College, Brown said: "One of the major challenges ... is understanding the nature of power, how to get it, how to use it, how to feel comfortable with the notion of power. For many managers of color, it's like walking onto a football field with a basketball; they're playing the wrong game."

Not sure how power operates in your work environment or which game really is being played? Observe people and activities for a month and then answer these important questions:

- **Is the hierarchy of authority the primary clue to who holds the most power here?** How do the top executives influence others in leadership positions? What do employees think about the top leaders? How is power defined?
- **What drives the top people in positions of power?** Is it profits, dividends, expansion, shareholders, innovation, excellence? Something else?
- **Besides the people in obvious positions of power, who else seems to hold a strong position of power or influence?** Why? What are their areas of influence? What is their relationship to the top power brokers?
- **What positions/roles are the most valued ones?** Why? Who's getting developed, mentored or promoted? What skills, experiences and behaviors count most? Who's emulating whom?
- **What other factors seem to be tied to power and influence here?** Being outspoken? Non-challenging? Well liked? Loyal? Long service? Social or community connections?
- **Where do you fall in the organizational and power hierarchy?** How does your standing compare to others? Do you have any power currency? If so, what? If no, why not?

Your responses to the questions will help you understand the power interests at play in your workplace. But remember: Power and politics are not static phenomena. Become an astute observer in your workplace environment and stay alert to important changes in the landscape.

## Play Or Be Played

The workplace is increasingly more demanding and competitive. By establishing your unique political foothold in the workplace, you empower yourself to take full charge of your work life and ultimately demonstrate that power to those around you. Managers of color and women should be especially keen observers of office politics.

**Rumor:** You can find a work environment void of politics.

**Reality:** Every workplace has its own politics. It behooves you to observe and discover the unique elements of your office's politics.

**Rumor:** Power is a bad word, an unpleasant concept.

**Reality:** Power is a currency that can be employed for good or bad. Understanding how power operates in your workplace can help you harness it to achieve positive outcomes and advance your goals.

**Rumor:** If you work hard and keep your nose clean, the promotions will come and you will be successful.

**Reality:** Working hard and staying under the radar screen isn't always enough. In a competitive work world, being politically adept is as critical as being smart, talented and hardworking.

**Rumor:** Office politics are treacherous. I'd rather stay ignorant of the office politics in my workplace.

**Reality:** Even if you could avoid office politics, you may find yourself the victim of political potholes and crossfire. Taking an active approach gives you more control over your work life and career.

While you may not be able to control biases or cultural insensitivities in the workplace, lack of attention to office politics can create one more dimension of exclusion or barriers to advancement. And, in certain offices, politics may actually supersede or obscure issues of gender and race.

What can you do to thrive in a political environment? There's no magic formula, but common sense, fair play and sound judgment are good starting points. Beyond those qualities, here's my list of tips for managing office politics:

1. **Be essential.** First and foremost, be a top performer. Do your job and more. Be known as a "go to" person — someone people want on their team. Volunteer for projects and new initiatives.
2. **Have a personal plan.** Design a career path and set ambitious goals. Don't hesitate to ask for what you need to learn and advance. Stay alert to opportunities to showcase your talents. Be flexible in your choices and patient with your progress but decide how long you are willing to wait to get what you want.
3. **Get to know your "boss."** What are your manager's goals, priorities and ambitions? Her/his preferred style of getting work done? Your goal should be to do things in ways that your "boss" will value and make her/him shine. Once s/he knows that you are working in her/his behalf, ask to be developed, involved more or "promoted" to others.
4. **Stay "in the loop."** Learn the lingo and nuances (spoken and unspoken) in your workplace. Be alert to changes; stay informed. Mingle broadly but avoid being in the mix of people who keep gossip, griping and negative undercurrents alive. Be discreet with confidential information; there's no such thing as a secret once two people know.
5. **Stand for the right things.** Reputations are hard to build and easy to destroy. Be known as a person who is trustworthy, reliable, honest and fair. Do what you say you will do. Speak up when you hear false rumors, unfair criticism or ethnic slurs. Even if you are not liked by everyone, you will be respected by most.
6. **Build a strong network.** Few of us succeed without help. Cherish friends and supporters. Cultivate mentors and confidantes who will offer good counsel and share important information. Seek advice from other people of color, people you can learn from, people who can influence your career. Ask for candid feedback regularly.
7. **Help others get ahead.** Be willing to share your expertise, experience and insights with others. You'll gain greater confidence as people develop and, as they advance, you'll broaden your network and access to information, resources, etc. One way to convert your competitors to allies: help them succeed.
8. **Think like you own the company but remember: you don't.** Get to know the business well and think like a CEO — you'll gain greater appreciation for the tough decisions and begin to anticipate executive actions. Resist the temptation to publicly blame and criticize those above you — they may not be perfect but they're probably doing what they believe is best. Work to see the whole picture of a situation but realize that you're rarely privy to every piece of the puzzle.
9. **Act like a strategist.** Pick your battles — you can't win every time and you shouldn't waste your power on minor skirmishes. Don't employ "all or nothing" thinking; aim for win-win outcomes and look for compromises that

won't compromise your honor. When trying to achieve major goals, get advance support and build consensus among key decision makers.

10. **Know when to fold 'em.** Be willing to own up to your mistakes and failures; people will respect (and, hopefully, forgive) you for your courage. Always look for the lessons learned so you don't repeat them. If the company's culture and politics are making you miserable, move on. Decide it's time to go before you are asked to leave or before you have lost your self-esteem. When you leave, don't burn your bridges. Use your lessons to find a company where you start with a clean slate and thrive.

Work hard? Definitely. But instead of keeping your head down, keep your antenna up. Instead of keeping your nose clean, use it to sniff out information and opportunities. Instead of seeing power and politics as dirty words, put them to good use for yourself and others.

*Jacqui Love Marshall is the former vice president/staff development & diversity for Knight Ridder. She can be reached at [jlovemarshall@yahoo.com](mailto:jlovemarshall@yahoo.com).*